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Laguzzi

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(54) **STERILISATION DEVICE WITH ELECTRON BEAMS FOR THIN WALLED CONTAINERS AND STERILISATION METHOD**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.**

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See application file for complete search history.

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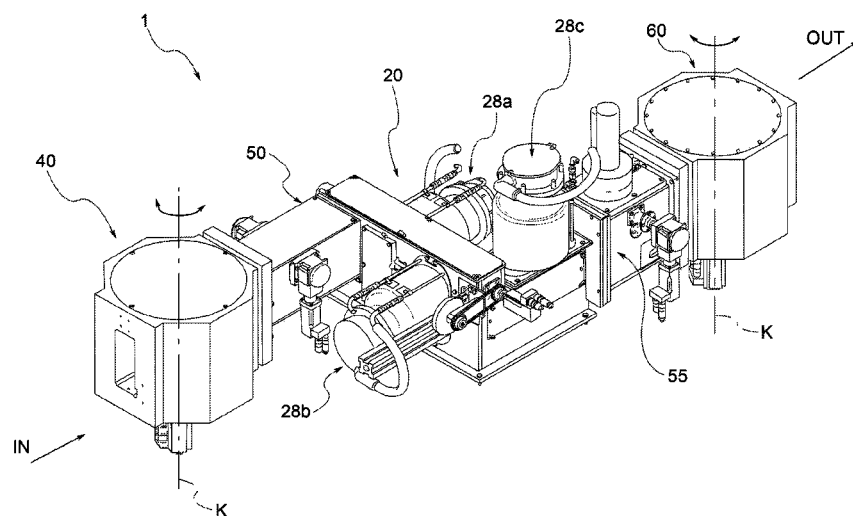
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A sterilization device (1) with electron beams for thin walled containers (C) comprises a sterilization chamber provided with a first electron cannon (28a) positioned horizontally and a further electron cannon (28c) positioned vertically, to strike the container from different angles.

10 Claims, 13 Drawing Sheets



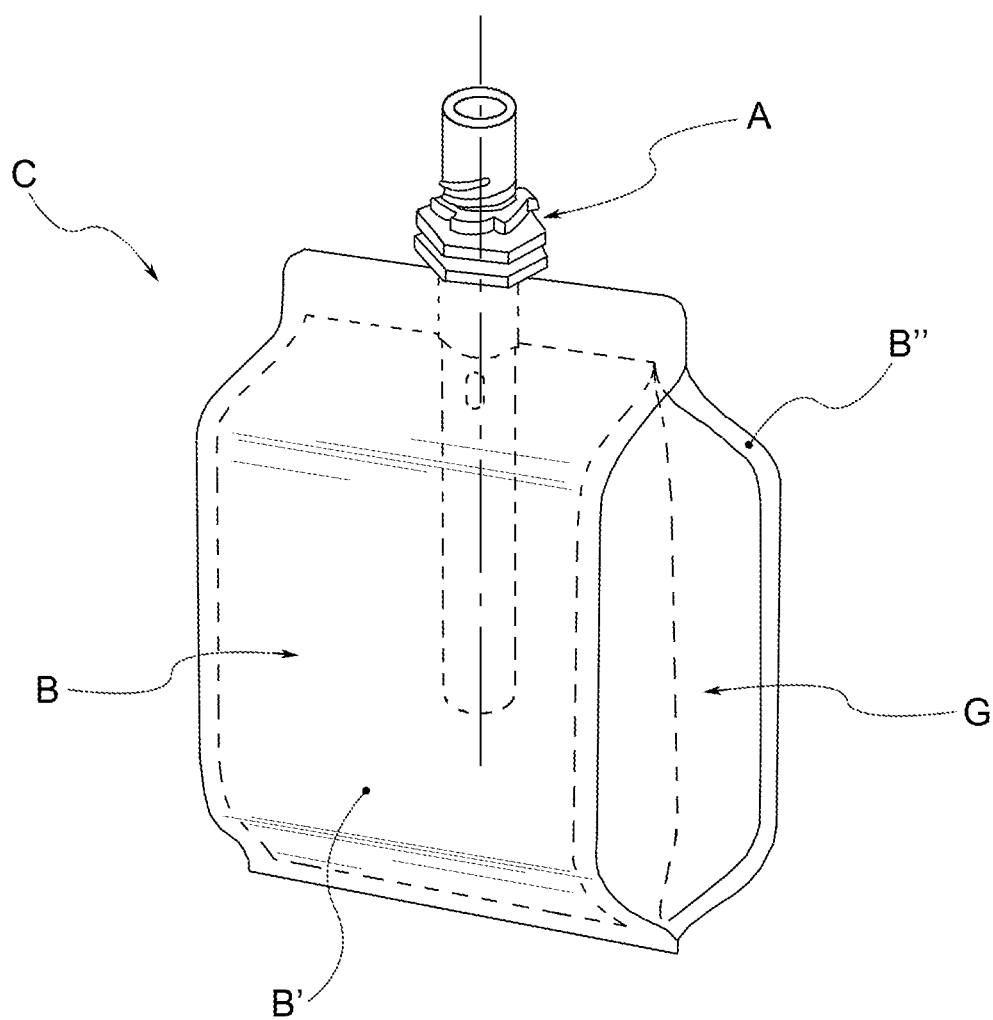


Fig. 1

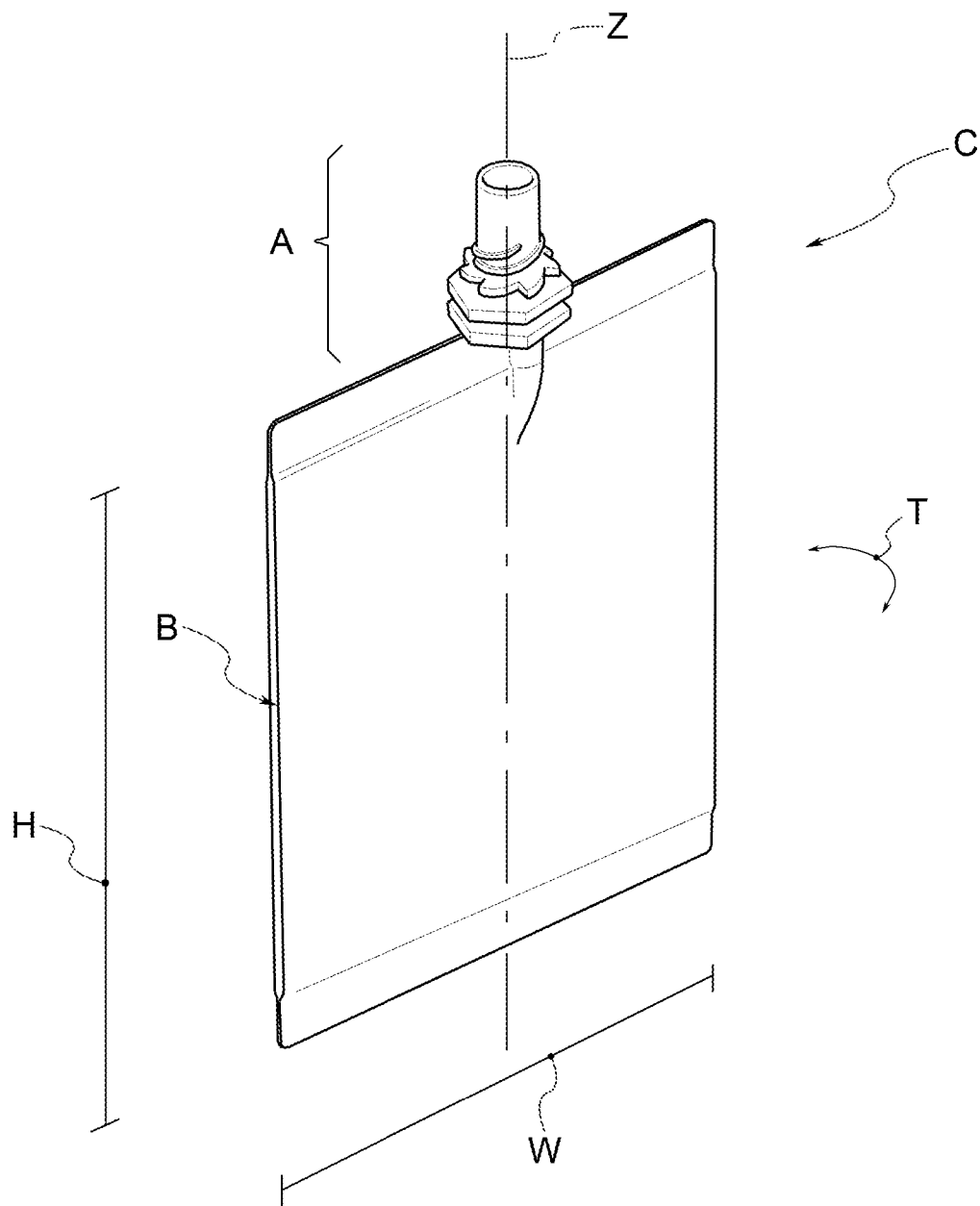


Fig. 2

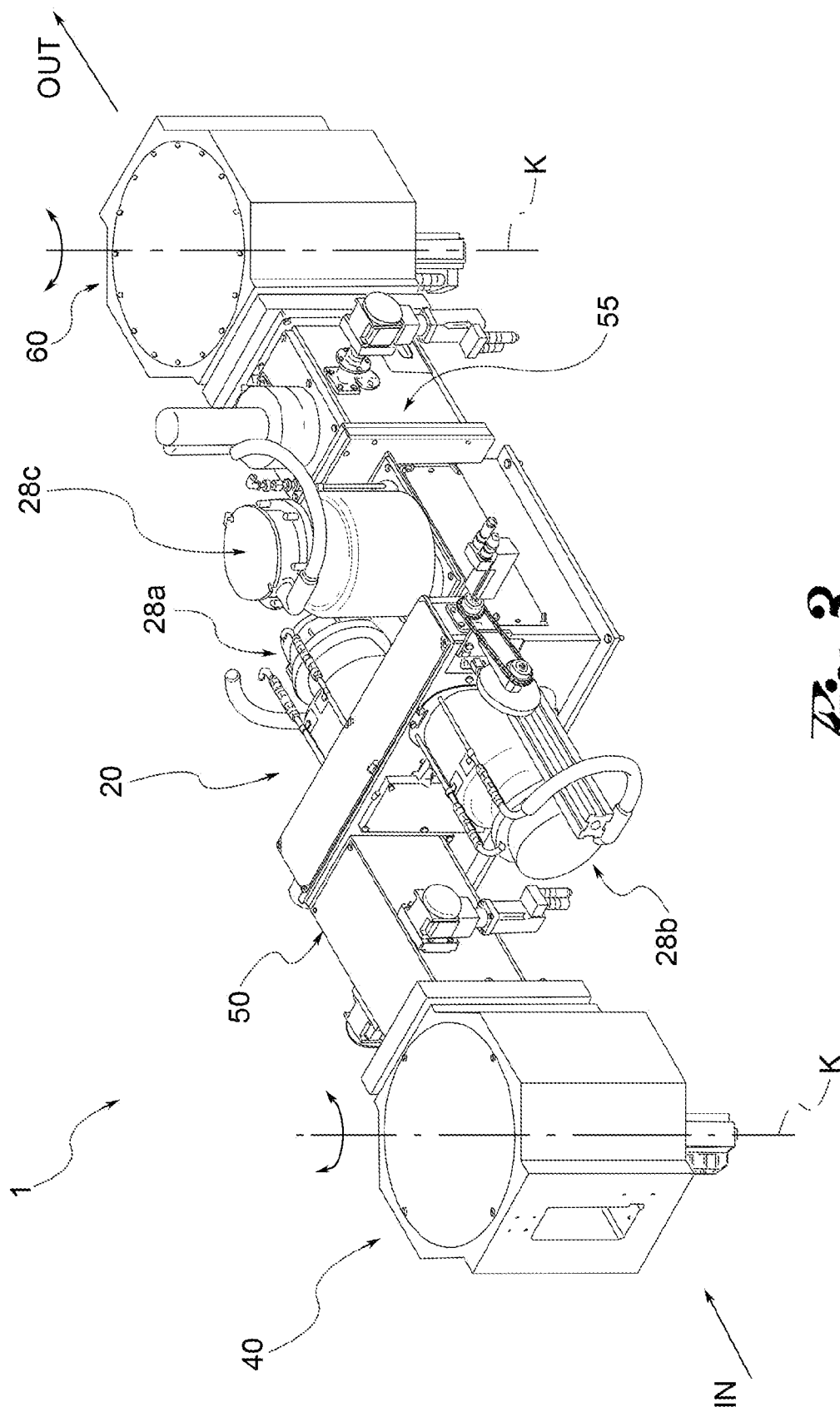


Fig. 3

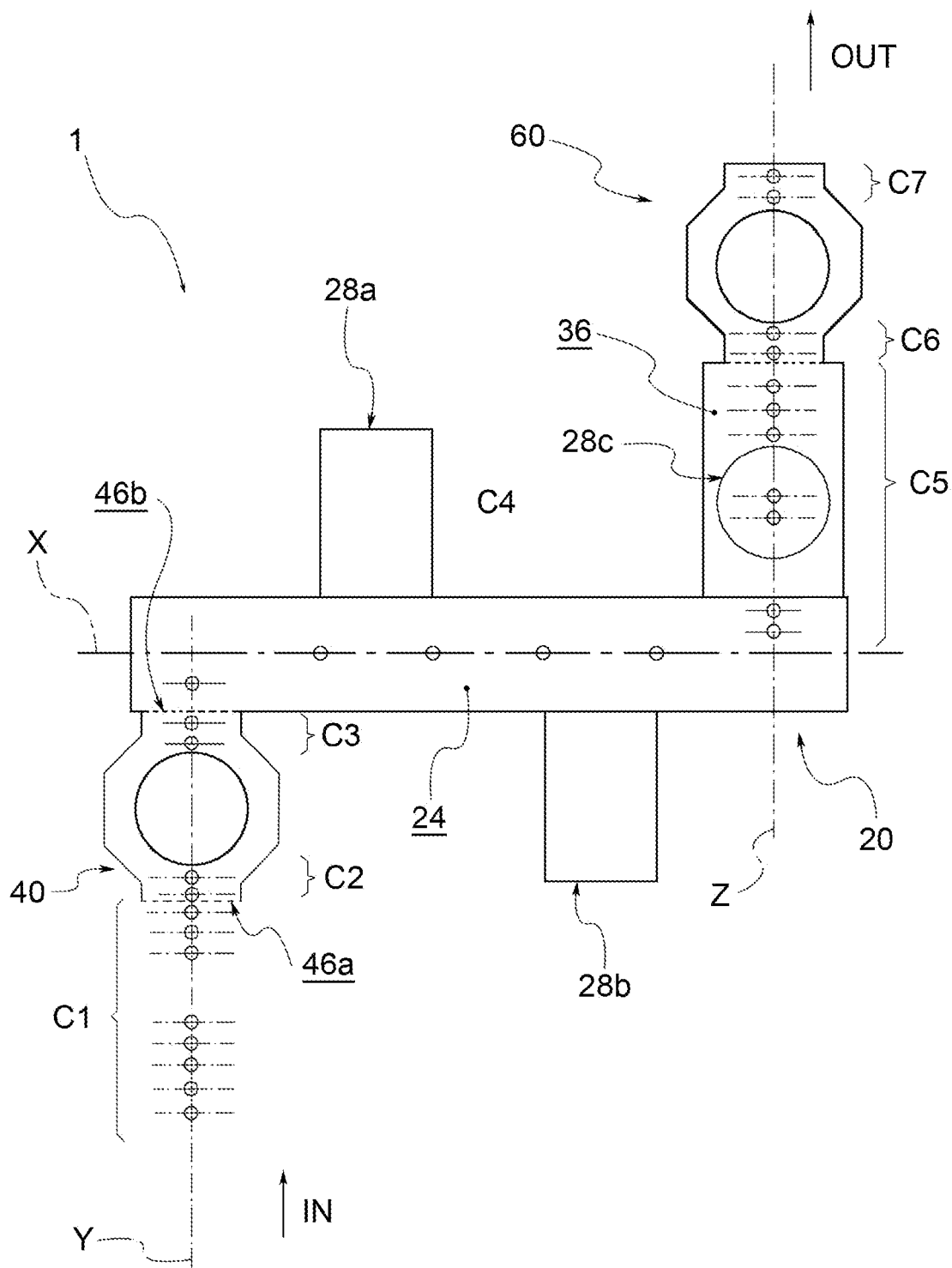
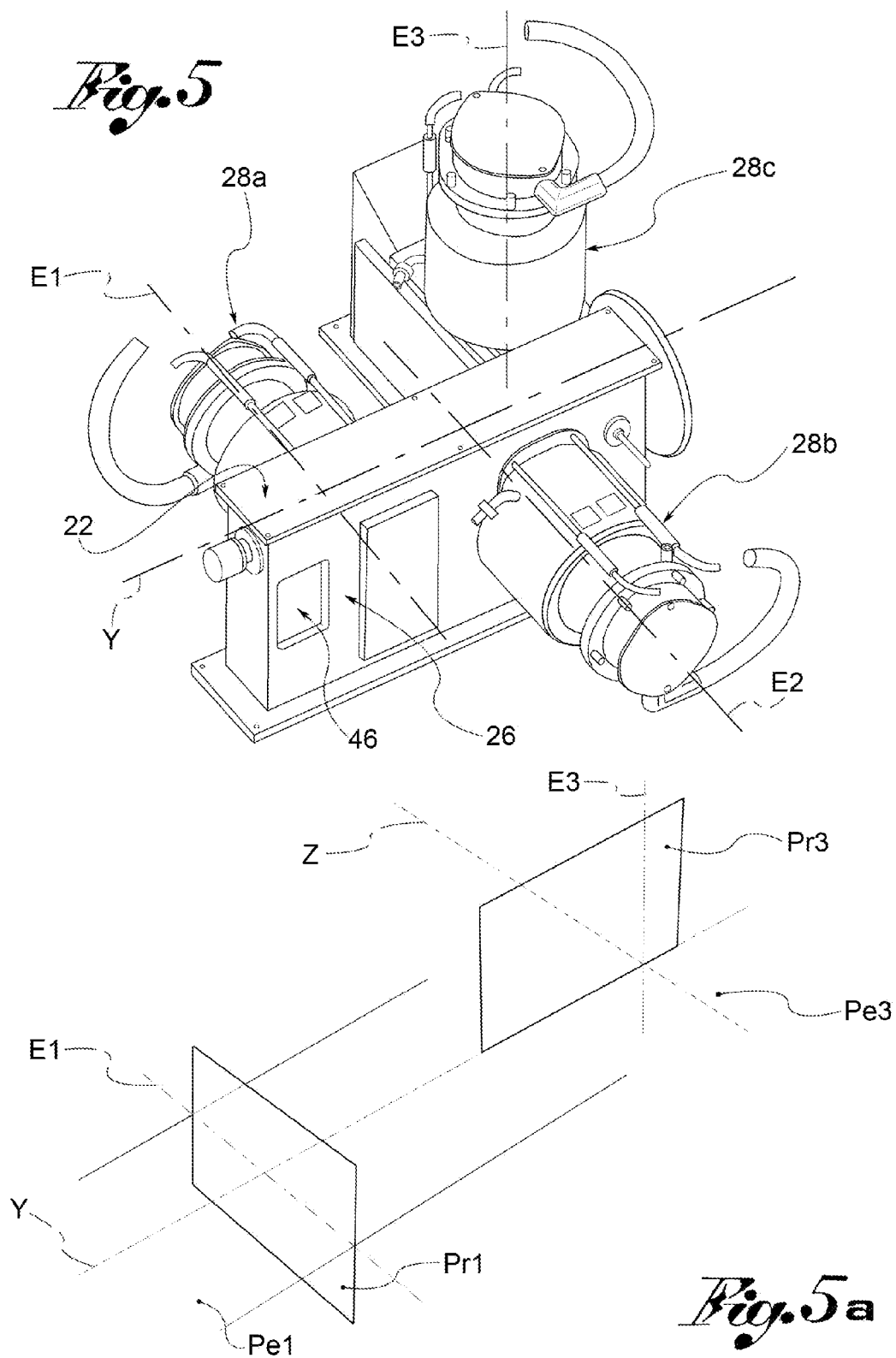


Fig. 4



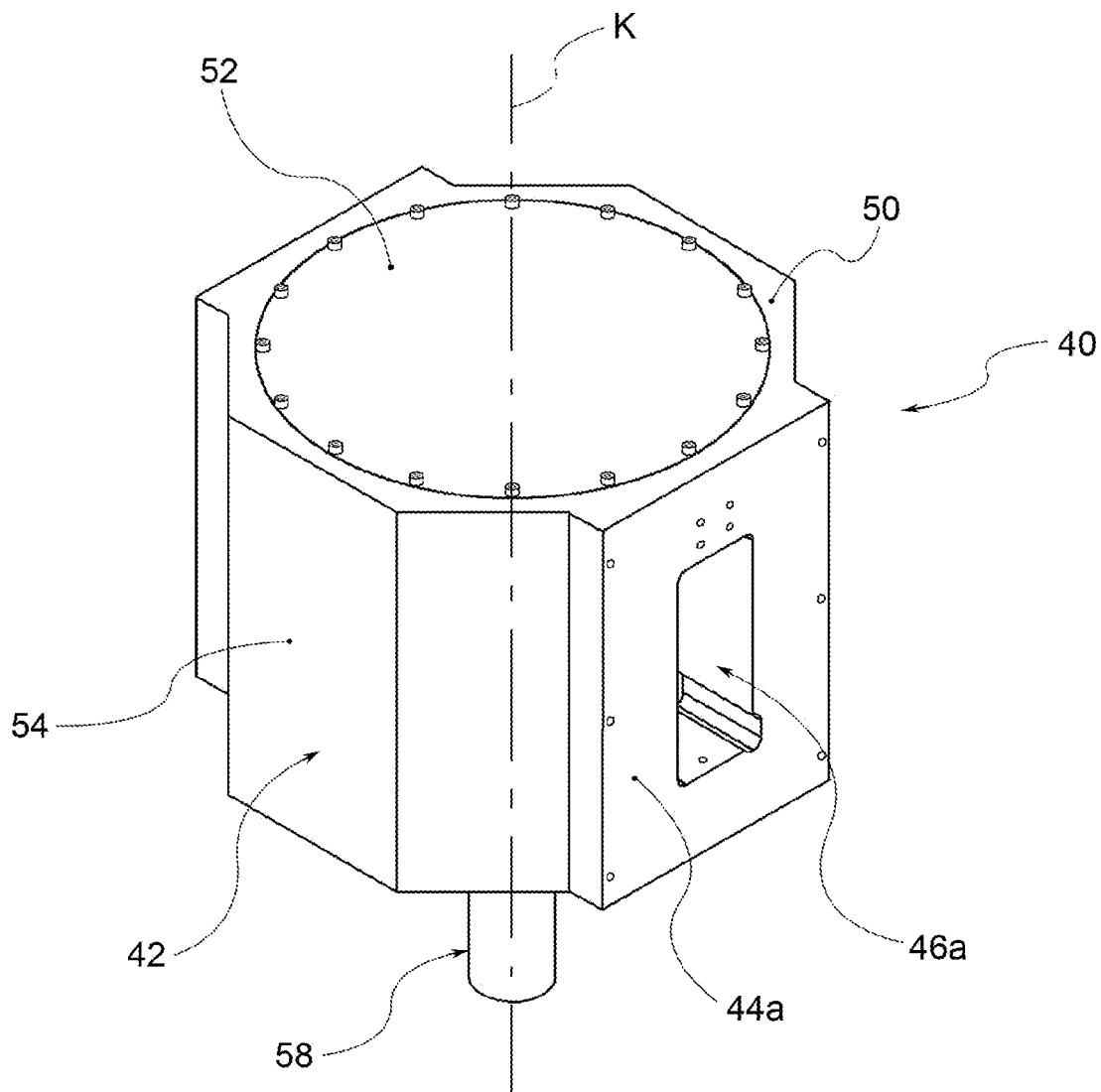


Fig. 6

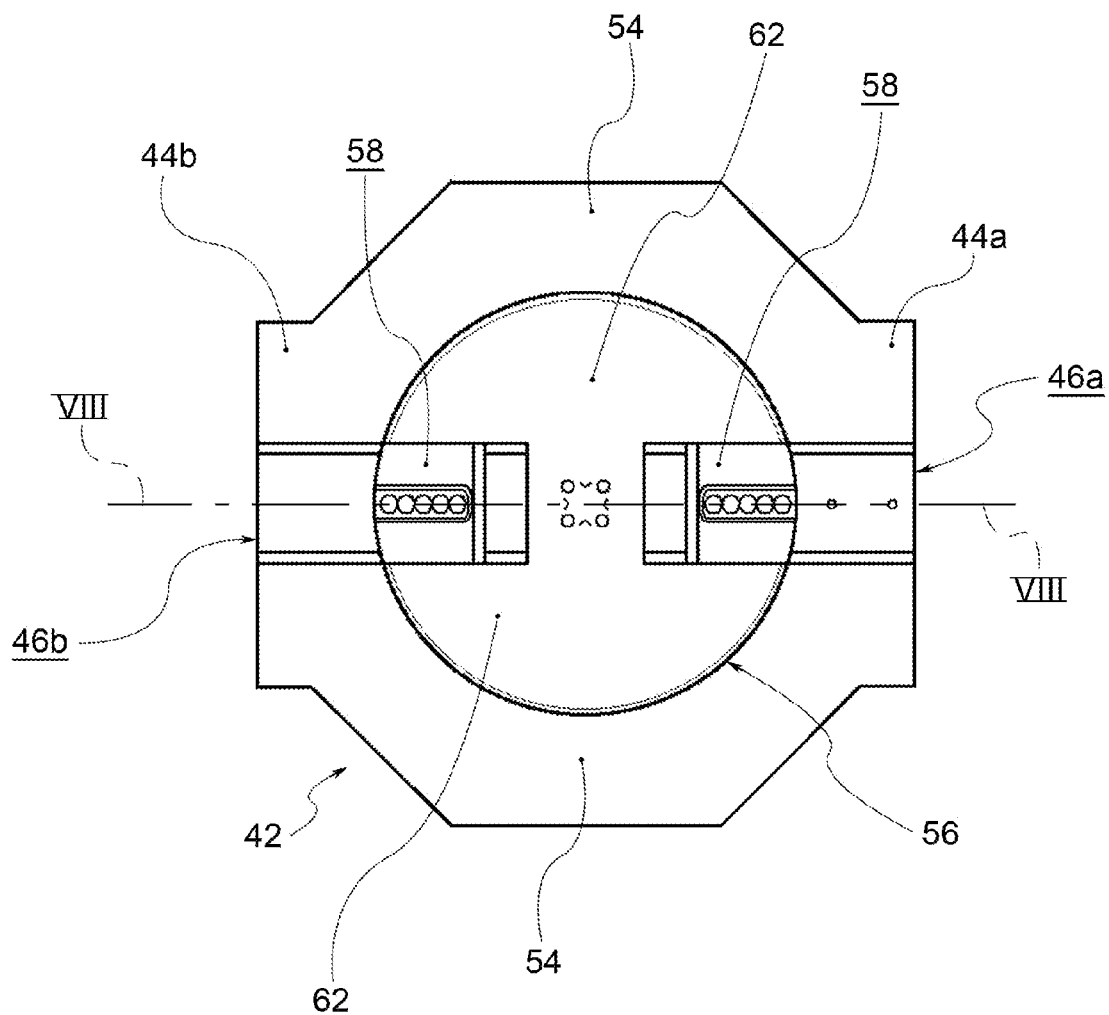


Fig. 7

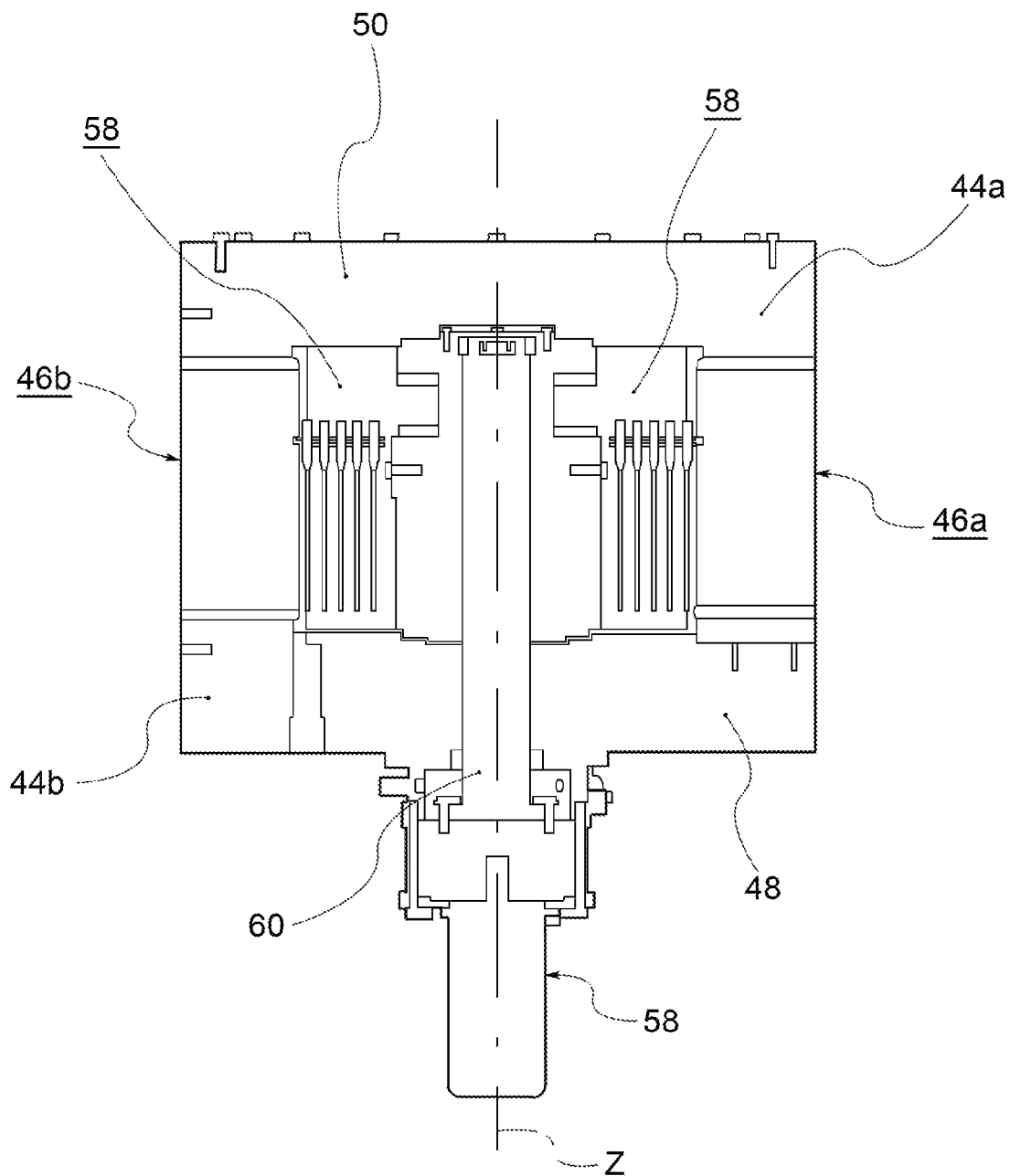


Fig. 8

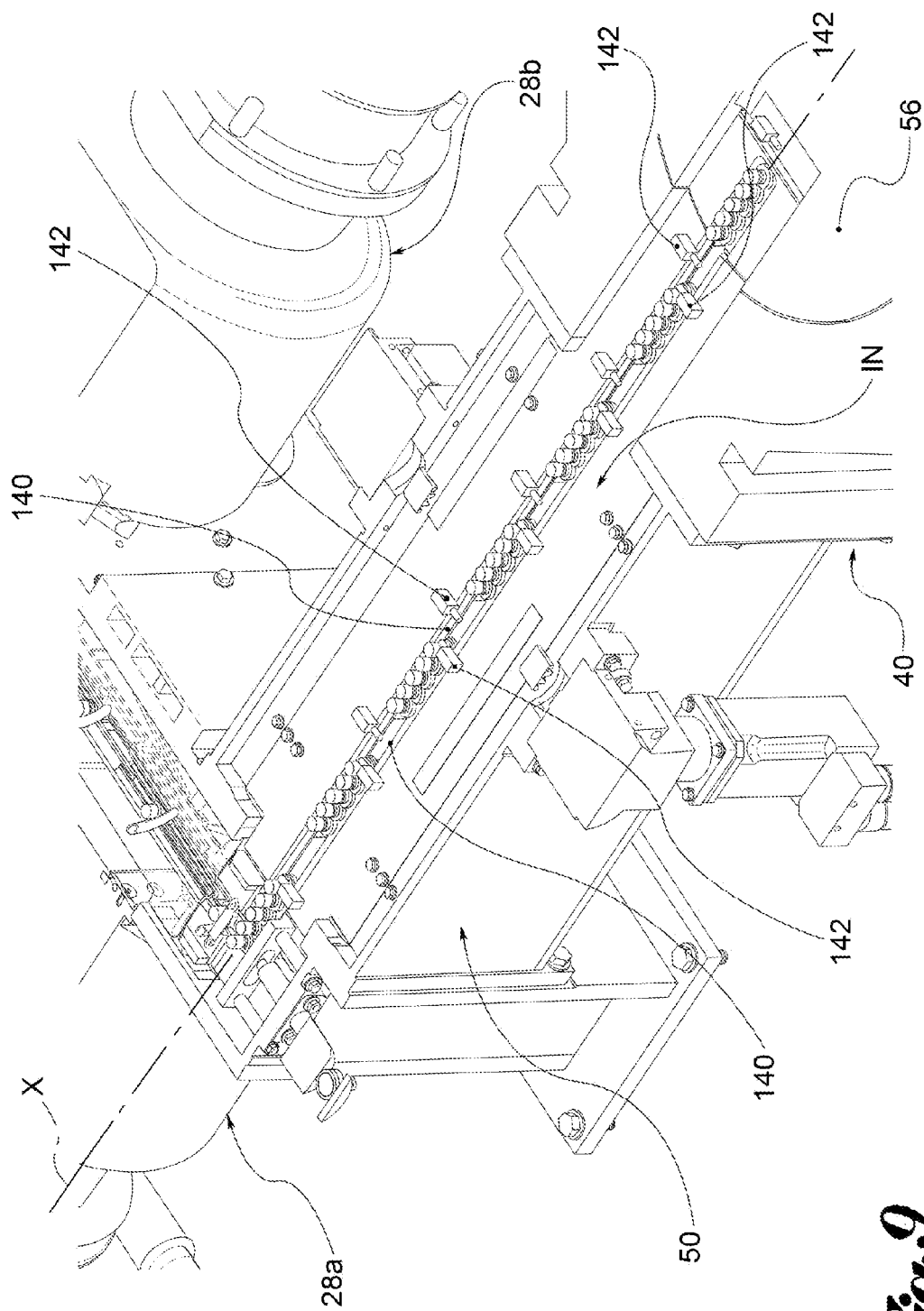
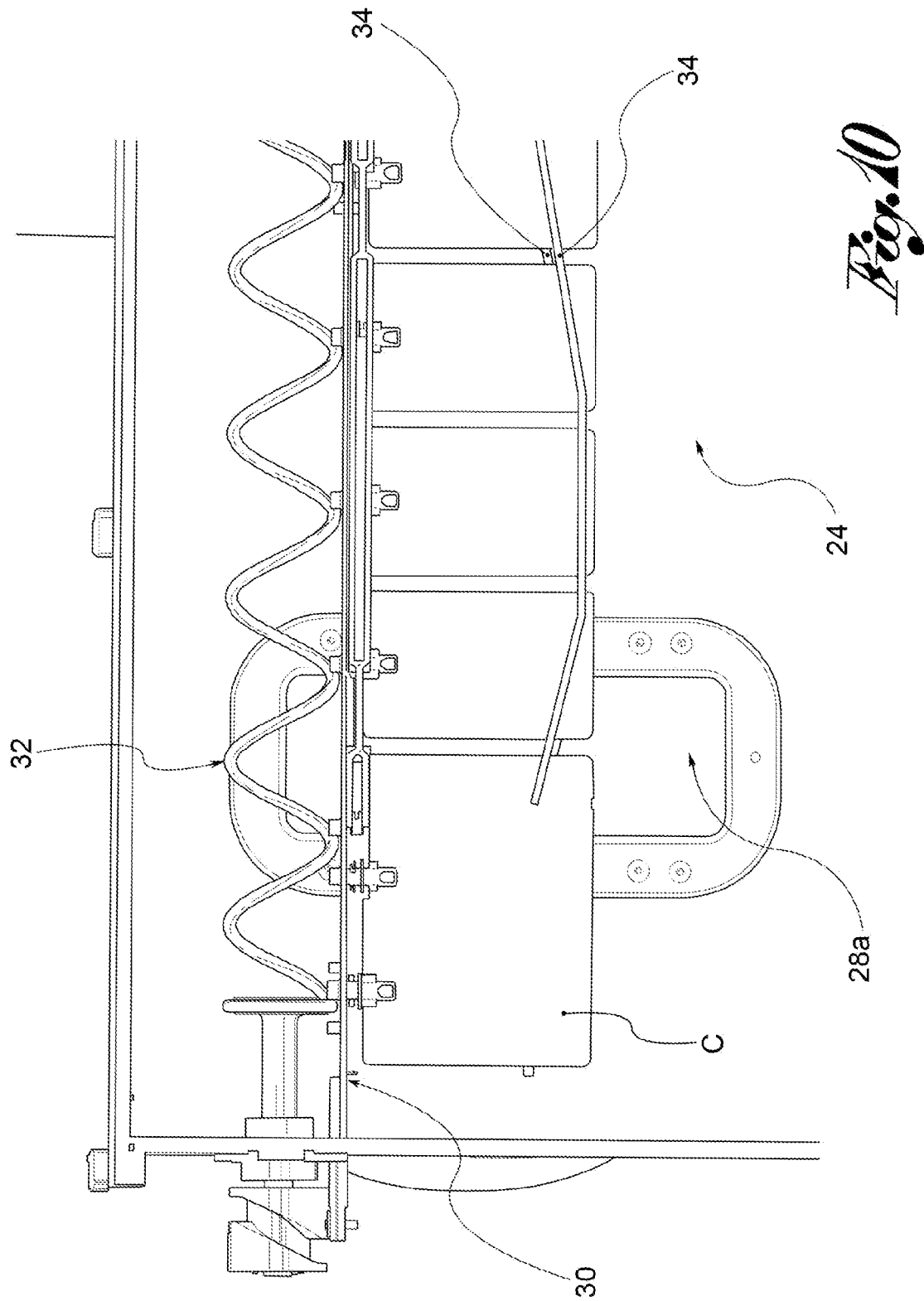
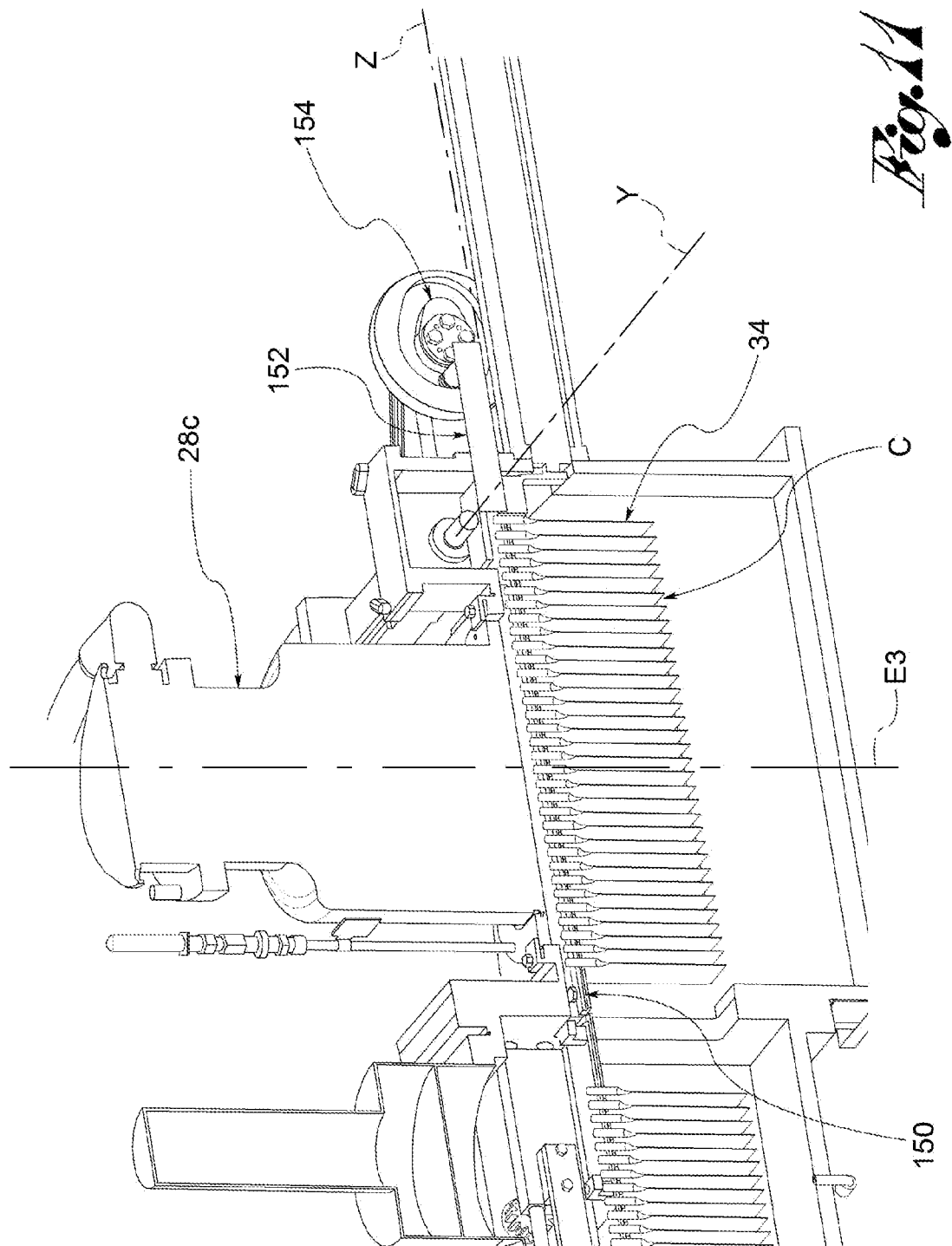


Fig. 9





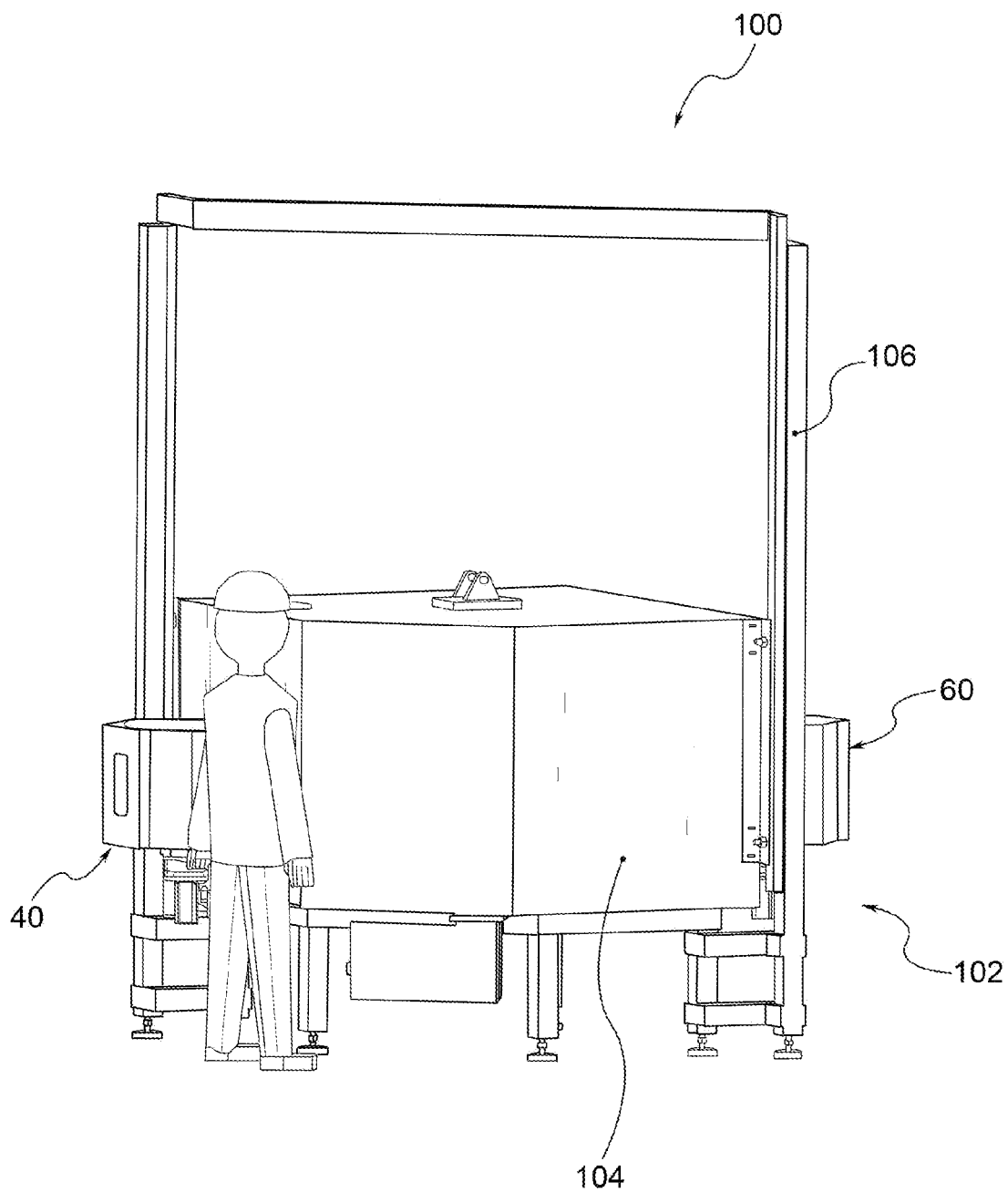


Fig. 12a

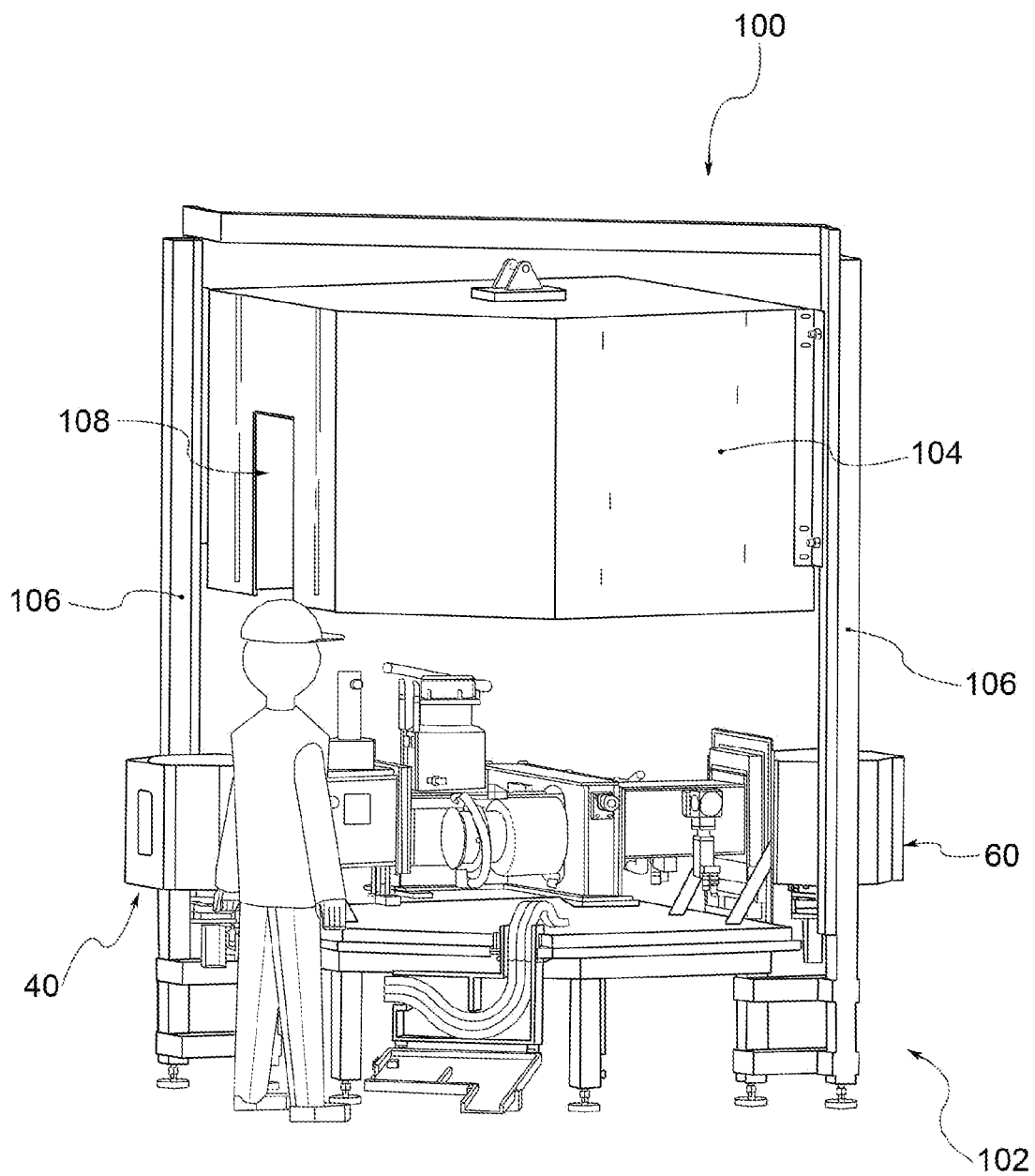


Fig. 12b

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STERILISATION DEVICE WITH ELECTRON BEAMS FOR THIN WALLED CONTAINERS AND STERILISATION METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is the 35 U.S.C. §371 national stage of PCT application PCT/IB2012/051903, filed Apr. 17, 2012 which claims priority to Italian Patent Application No. BS2011A000060, dated Apr. 26, 2011, both of which are incorporated by reference in their entirety.

The present invention relates to a device for sterilising thin-walled containers, in particular flexible containers, such as those for containing dense fluids, especially foods such as creams, yoghurt, honey, fruit juices or medicines and the like.

In the food industry, the sterilisation of containers is extremely important for preventing infections and preserving the food contained therein correctly.

Sometimes, chemical sterilisation is performed, during which the container is washed with disinfectants, such as hydrogen peroxide, and then dried, before being sent for subsequent filling operations.

However, chemical sterilisation has some drawbacks such as for instance the presence of residues of the chemical disinfectant in the dry container or the presence of areas which have not been disinfected on account of complicated or irregular geometries of the container. Such drawback is particularly felt in the field of thin-walled flexible containers.

Electron beam sterilisation is becoming increasingly widespread.

Initially, the performance of electron beam sterilisation was restricted to specialised centres, which the containers to be treated had to be sent to and from which the sterilised containers were picked up, with a considerable increase in transport costs and logistics. In such centres high powered (500 kV-10 MV) electron cannons were usually utilised, with all the relative consequences on operator safety and environmental pollution.

Recently, electron beam sterilisation is becoming increasingly popular, thanks to the creation of particularly compact electron cannons functioning efficiently even at low voltages (80-150 kV). Such cannons permit the performance of electron beam sterilisation directly in the container production plant, with notable economic savings.

The purpose of the present invention is to make a low voltage electron beam sterilisation device particularly suitable for treating thin-walled, flexible containers.

The characteristics and advantages of the sterilisation device according to the present invention will be evident from the following description, made by way of a non-limiting example, with reference to the attached drawings, wherein:

FIGS. 1 and 2 show a specimen of a flexible, thin-walled container, respectively full and empty;

FIG. 3 shows an overall view of the sterilisation device according to the present invention, according to one embodiment;

FIG. 4 is a scheme diagram of a layout of the sterilisation device in FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 shows a sterilisation group of the sterilisation device in FIG. 3;

FIG. 5a shows a diagram of the reference planes and the emission planes defined for the present invention;

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FIG. 6 shows an input unit of the sterilisation device in FIG. 3;

FIG. 7 shows a horizontal cross-section view of the input unit in FIG. 6;

FIG. 8 shows a longitudinal cross-section view of the input unit in FIG. 6, along the section plane VIII-VIII in FIG. 7;

FIG. 9 shows a pre-sterilisation chamber of the device in FIG. 3;

FIG. 10 shows a main chamber of the sterilisation group in FIG. 5, at the point of the input unit;

FIG. 11 shows a secondary chamber of the sterilisation group in FIG. 5;

FIGS. 12a and 12b show an example of embodiment of the sterilisation system, fitted with an external, anti-radiation casing, in a closed and open configuration respectively.

According to the drawings, reference numeral 1 globally denotes a low voltage electron beam sterilisation device for thin-walled, flexible containers.

In particular, the device 1 is suitable for sterilising containers C consisting of a body B formed of two B', B" or more walls of flexible film, facing one another and joined, for example welded along the edges, if required with gusset side walls G, and provided with a straw A in rigid material, fitted in a section of the edge of the body B, usually between the side walls. The straw A projects from the body along a straw axis and may be coupled to a cap, also in rigid material.

When the flexible container is just made and empty, the body is particularly thin (FIG. 2), while it appears to bulge when filled (FIG. 1).

For the empty containers C, a height H is defined along the straw axis, a width W transversal to the height H, and a thickness T of the thin wall.

One embodiment example of such containers is shown in documents EP-A1-1538105 and U.S. D-552,483, in the Applicant's name; one embodiment example of a straw with cap is shown in the document WO-A1-2008-050361, also in the Applicant's name.

The sterilisation device 1 comprises a sterilisation group 20, in which the sterilisation by means of low voltage electron beams takes place, an input unit 40 for the introducing the containers to be treated in the sterilisation group 20 and an output unit 60 for the exit of the treated containers from the sterilisation group 20.

Said input unit 40 and said output unit 60 also form an obstacle to the leakage of radioactive emissions, and in particular of the X-rays produced by the electron beam inside the sterilisation group 20, at its input and output.

The input unit 40 comprises an outer casing 42 provided with a front wall 44a which an entrance 46a is made in for the entrance of the containers C to be treated, coming from machines upstream of the sterilisation device 1.

Similarly, the outer casing 42 is provided with a back wall 44b which an exit 46b is made in for the entrance of the containers C to be treated in the sterilisation group 20.

The outer casing 42 further comprises a bottom 48 and a cover 50, preferably fitted with a removable lid 52 for access to the inside of the casing.

The outer casing 42 further comprises side walls 54, preferably polygonal-shaped.

The input unit 40 further comprises a swivelling body 56, housed at least partially in the compartment inside the casing 42, swivelling on command in alternate directions or always in the same direction, around a rotation axis K.

To such purpose, the input unit 40 is fitted with drive means, such as an electric motor 58, preferably of the

brushless type connected to the swivelling body **56**, preferably positioned under the bottom **48** of the casing **42**. For example, the motor **58** is connected to the swivelling body **56** by means of a shaft **60** which crosses the bottom **48** of the outer casing.

The swivelling body **56** has at least one loading seat suitable for receiving at least one container to be treated. In particular, the loading seat can be aligned with the entrance **46** of the casing **42** to enable the loading of containers to be treated.

Preferably the swivelling body **56** has two loading seats **58**, for example diametrically opposite each other, which can be alternately aligned with the entrance **46a**.

Moreover, by rotation on command, the loading seat **58** can be aligned with the exit **46b** of the casing for dropping the containers to be treated into the sterilisation group **20**.

Preferably when one loading seat is aligned with the exit **46b**, another loading seat is aligned with the entrance **46a**, so that the loading of containers to be treated from the entrance **46a** can take place simultaneously with the emptying of other containers from the exit **46b**.

The swivelling body **56** further presents filling portions, outside the loading seats, which occupy the operating area of the swivelling body rotating in the casing, so as to prevent or limit as far as possible the presence of leaks from inside the sterilisation group **20** outwards through the input unit **40**.

For example, the swivelling body **56** is a solid cylindrical body in which loadings seats **58** are made, generally diametrically opposite each other, having a radial extension from the periphery towards the inside of the cylindrical body, so as to determine solid portions of operating space in the form of cylindrical segments, which brush the surface of the inner compartment of the casing **42**.

The containers to be treated pass into the sterilisation group **20** from the input unit **40**.

To such purpose, the sterilisation device **1** comprises extraction means, suitable for extracting the containers housed in the loading seat **58** facing the exit **46b** of the input unit **40**.

According to a preferred embodiment, the extraction means comprise an extraction guide, for example formed of an extraction rail **140**, which extends in an input direction X.

For example, the input direction X comes out of the loading seat **58** when aligned with the exit **46b**, and preferably, is a rectilinear direction.

The containers are suspended from the extraction rail **140** by means of the respective straws A and the extraction means are suitable for pushing the straws along the input direction X, in a direction of advancement IN.

To such purpose, for example, the extraction means comprise a pair of pushers provided with fingers **142** positioned on both sides of the extraction rail **140**, spaced out along the input direction X, staggered along said input direction.

Preferably the pushers are driven by brushless motors.

The pushers are suitable for moving the fingers **142** in translation along the input direction X in the direction of advancement IN so as to engage and push the straws, for example corresponding to a group of containers.

Moreover, the pushers are provided with a lifting and return movement, which is implemented when a pusher has completed its forward stroke, so as to pass over the row of hanging containers and go back, to extract further containers housed in the loading seat **58** of the loading unit **40** and make them advance.

In short, according to the embodiment illustrated said extraction means perform a "jumping" movement in which

the fingers of the two pushers alternate in pushing each group of containers along the input direction X.

According to a preferred embodiment, the device **1** comprises a pre-sterilisation chamber **50**, shielded from the leakage of X-rays, extending in an input direction X, positioned downstream of the loading unit **40** and upstream of the sterilisation group **20**.

For example, the extraction means are housed in the pre-sterilisation chamber.

The sterilisation group **20** comprise an outer casing **22** which internally defines a sterilisation chamber, comprising a main chamber **24**. In particular, a side wall **26** of the outer casing **22** presents the access for the containers coming from the input unit **40**, moved by the extraction means.

The main chamber **24** extends mainly in a first sterilisation direction Y, preferably rectilinear.

Preferably the first sterilisation direction Y is inclined in relation to the input direction X, preferably orthogonal to it.

Moreover, the pre-sterilisation chamber **50** helps to prevent the leakage of X-rays from the input unit **40**.

The sterilisation group **20** further comprises at least one electron cannon suitable for emitting a cloud of electrons to sterilise the containers.

For an electron cannon, an emission cone of the electronic cloud and an emission axis which defines such emission cone is defined.

For example, the group **20** comprises two electron cannons **28a**, **28b**, having respective emission axes E1, E2.

Preferably the emission axes E1, E2 lie on the same horizontal plane or on planes parallel to the horizontal plane.

The cannons **28a**, **28b** are positioned in sequence in the first sterilisation direction Y, facing each other in the main chamber **24**, positioned opposite one another.

The cannons **28a**, **28b** are positioned in sequence in the sense that the containers are struck first by the electronic cloud emitted by the first cannon and then by the electronic cloud emitted by the second cannon, or, in a transition zone only, they are simultaneously subject to the electronic cloud of the previous cannon and to the cloud of electrons of the next cannon.

The sterilisation group **20** further comprises support means of the containers along the main chamber **24** suitable for supporting said containers in the first sterilisation direction Y.

For example, said support means comprise a first rail **30** which extends in the first sterilisation direction Y, which the containers are hung from, for example by means of the straw A.

The sterilisation group **20** further comprises first means of advancing the containers suitable for moving the containers in the first sterilisation direction.

To change direction from the input direction X to the first sterilisation direction Y, the first extraction means act in conjunction with the means of advancement.

In particular, for example, the extraction means comprise a drum cam, positioned at the end of the pair of rails **140**, suitable for pushing the containers into the main chamber **24**, where they engage with the first means of advancement.

For example, said first means of advancement comprise a rotor element **32** which extends with its axis along the first sterilisation direction Y, rotatable so as to push the containers in said direction Y.

For example, the rotor element **32** surmounts the first rail **30** and engages the top of the straw A of the container C, projecting from the first rail **30**, to push the container in the first sterilisation direction Y.

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Preferably moreover, the sterilisation group **20** further comprises guide means suitable for guiding the body of the containers in the first sterilisation direction Y.

For example, said guide means comprise a pair of thread-like guides **34** extending in the first sterilisation direction Y, positioned below the first rail **30** and spaced out, so that the bodies B of the containers C are placed between them. Given the closeness of the guides **34**, the oscillation of the containers is thereby limited or prevented.

The sterilisation chamber of the sterilisation group **20** further comprises a secondary chamber **36** which extends in a second sterilisation direction Z, incident to the first sterilisation direction Y, for example, preferably, orthogonal to it.

The rotor element **32** pushes the containers in the first sterilisation direction Y, as far as the end of the first rail **30**, where the first means of advancement co-operate with the second means of advancement to change the direction of advancement from the first sterilisation direction Y to the second sterilisation direction Z.

The second means of advancement are suitable for moving the containers in the second sterilisation direction.

Moreover, the sterilisation group **20** comprises second support means suitable for supporting the containers in the second sterilisation direction Z.

For example, the second support means comprise a second rail **150** which extends from the zone where the first rail **30** ends, in the second sterilisation direction Z, and is suitable for hanging the containers C from, for example by means of the straw A.

In the transition zone between the first rail **30** and the second rail **150**, the second means of advancement comprise a pusher **152** suitable for moving in alternated translatory movement in the second sterilisation direction Z.

The movement of the pusher **152** is synchronised with the movement of the rotor **32**, for example by means of a rotating cam **154**, connected by a belt or chain to the rotor element **32**.

When the container C is left by the rotor element **32** at the end of the first rail **30**, the second pusher **152** pushes said container along the second rail **102**.

The containers hanging from the second rail **150** proceed in the second sterilisation direction Z as a result of the subsequent insertion of a further container in the tail, that is to say so that the subsequent container pushes the tail of the containers before it forward in the direction of advancement.

According to one embodiment variation (not shown), the second means of advancement are suitable for separately engaging sets of containers, to make them advance in the second sterilisation direction Z; for example, said second means of advancement are structurally and functionally similar to said first means of advancement.

The sterilisation group **20** further comprises a further electron cannon **28c**, such as a third cannon **28c** positioned along the second sterilisation direction Z, having an emission axis E3 incident to the horizontal plane, preferably orthogonal to it. In other words, the third cannon is positioned so that the emission axis E3 is parallel to the axis of the straw A of the container being treated.

It is therefore clear that the first sterilisation direction Y and the second sterilisation direction Z together define a sterilisation path along the sterilisation chamber.

The sterilisation device **1** further comprises an output unit **60**, joined to the secondary chamber **36**, downstream of the third cannon **28c** in relation the direction of advancement of the containers being treated.

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Preferably the output unit **60** is functionally and structurally similar to the input unit **40**.

The treated containers pass from the sterilisation group **20** and in particular from its secondary chamber **36** to the output unit **60** and from this outside the device **1**.

The sterilisation device comprises loading means suitable for loading a predefined number of containers C from the secondary chamber **36** to the loading seat of the input unit.

Preferably, said loading means comprise a pusher with a "jumping" movement similar to that described above.

According to a preferred embodiment, the device **1** comprises a post-sterilisation chamber **55**, shielded from the leakage of X-rays, extending in the second sterilisation direction Z, positioned downstream of the sterilisation group and upstream of the output unit **60**.

For example, the loading means are housed in the post-sterilisation chamber.

The post-sterilisation chamber also helps to prevent the leakage of X-rays from the output unit **60**.

The containers C1 entering the input unit **40** are aligned one after another with the walls facing each other; the containers C1 are facing in columns that is.

The containers C1 are moved so that one or more containers C2 are housed in the loading seat **58** of the input unit **40**. When the number of containers housed in the loading seat reaches a predefined number, the swivelling body **56** rotates to bring the loading seat **58** containing the containers C2 to align with the exit **46b** and, preferably, the other loading seat **58**, empty, to align with the entrance **46a** for a further load.

The containers C3 contained in the loading seat **58** aligned with the exit **46b** are moved so as to proceed along the input direction X, to then be deviated along the first sterilisation direction Y.

In particular, the containers C4 cross the main chamber **20** aligned one behind the other in the first sterilisation direction Y, that is so to be facing in rows.

In the first sterilisation direction Y, the containers C4 undergo a first sterilisation by the first and second cannon **28a**, **28b**, the emission axes of which E1, E2 lie substantially on a horizontal plane.

In the first sterilisation direction Y, the containers C4 are positioned in rows, so that the walls B', B'' of the body B are in front of the emission cone of the electron cannons **28a**, **28b**. In other words, the bodies B of the containers C4 are substantially coplanar and lie on a single plane in relation to which the emission axes E1, E2 are incident.

Such arrangement permits an excellent sterilisation of the walls B', B'' of the body B of the containers C4 and, if necessary, of the gusset sides G where provided.

Downstream of the second cannon **28b**, the containers being treated are deviated from the first sterilisation direction Y to the second sterilisation direction Z and at the same time moved along it so to enter and pass through the secondary chamber **36**.

In particular, the containers C5 cross the secondary chamber **36** aligned one behind another with the walls facing each other; that is to say the containers C5 are facing in columns.

In the second sterilisation direction Z, the containers C5 undergo a second sterilisation by the third electron cannon **28c**, the emission axis of which E3 is incident, in particular orthogonal to the horizontal plane.

In the second sterilisation direction Z, the containers C5 are positioned in columns, so that the axis of the straw A of the container is substantially parallel to the emission axis of the emission cone of the third cannon **28c**.

Such arrangement permits an excellent sterilisation of the straw A of the container C.

The containers C5 are moved so that one or more containers C6 are housed in the loading seat of the output unit 60. When the number of containers housed in the loading seat reaches a predefined number, the swivelling body rotates to bring the loading seat containing the containers C6 to align with the exit and, preferably, the other loading seat, empty, to align with the entrance for a further load.

The containers C7 contained in the loading seat aligned with the exit are moved to the outside of the sterilisation device.

The change of direction in the advancement of the containers during sterilisation makes it possible to optimise the exposition times of the parts of these to the electron beams.

In particular, in the first sterilisation direction Y, the containers C4 are facing in rows and, given the arrangement of the electron cannons 28a, 28b, the sterilisation is particularly effective on the walls B', B'' of the body B, which are particularly thin. The width dimension W of the containers C determines the transit time under the emission cones of the cannons 28a 28b of said containers.

In the second sterilisation direction Z, the containers C5 are facing in columns and, given the arrangement of the electron cannon 28c, the sterilisation is particularly effective inside the straw A. The thickness dimension T of the containers C determines the transit time under the emission cone of the cannon 28c of said containers.

Since the width W of the containers C is much greater than the thickness T of the same (the reason for which they are called thin walled containers), the exposition to the first sterilisation is much less than the exposition to the second sterilisation, with respect to the relative needs, since the walls of the container need a less prolonged sterilisation than the straw.

In general, along a sterilisation path, along which a first reference plane Pr1 and a further reference plane Pr3 are defined, separate from each other and incident to said sterilisation path, the first electron cannon 28a has an emission axis E1 lying on the first reference plane Pr1 and the further electron cannon 28c has an emission axis E3 lying on the further reference plane Pr3. The emission axis E3 of the further cannon 28c is inclined in relation to the sterilisation path, unlike the emission axis E1 of the first cannon 28a.

The container C can thereby be sterilised in different directions, to optimise the action of the electron clouds on different areas of the container.

Preferably moreover, a sterilisation system 100 comprises the sterilisation device, a support structure 102, which the device is placed on, for example raised off the ground, and an outer casing 104, which the device is contained in, suitable for acting as a screen to the leakage of radiation.

The outer casing 104 is composed of side walls in lead, which screen any radiation.

The casing 104 is fitted with a pair of seats 108, made in the side wall, at the point of the input unit and the output unit.

In the closed configuration, said units project outside the casing 104, to permit access of the containers to be sterilised or to allow the exit of the sterilised containers.

Preferably moreover, the structure 102 comprises a plurality of pillars 106, on which the casing 104 slides, to lower onto the device 1 and to contain it, or to lift up to permit servicing operations for example.

Innovatively, the low voltage electron beam sterilisation device according to the present invention is particularly suitable for treating thin-walled, flexible containers.

Advantageously, the device according to the invention is utilisable directly incorporated into the production plant since it greatly limits, in compliance with existing legislation, the leakage of radiation.

In particular, the design of the device according to the present invention follows the practical design rule known as the "3 bounce rule" according to which, any ray emitted by the cannons must bounce off the inner wall of the casing three times before getting out of the casing, thereby practically giving a zero value to the energy possessed.

Moreover, advantageously, it optimises the exposition times of the containers to the sterilisation, differentiating the exposure times according to the needs of the parts to be sterilised.

It is clear that a person skilled in the art may make modifications to the device described above.

For example, according to one embodiment variation, the electron cannon for the second sterilisation is on a plane with the cannon for the first sterilisation while after the first sterilisation the containers are made to rotate in such a way as to position themselves with the straw parallel to the emission axis of the cannon for the second sterilisation.

According to a further embodiment variation, the input unit and/or output unit have more than two loading seats, for example angularly equidistant.

According to yet a further embodiment, the first sterilisation is performed by a single electron cannon.

According to yet a further embodiment, the second sterilisation is performed by two or more electron cannons.

Furthermore, according to one embodiment variation, the swivelling body of the input unit and/or output unit performs a rotation of 90° to bring the loaded containers into alignment for exit.

According to a further embodiment variation, the motor for driving the swivelling body is connected to it by a cinematic chain.

Such variations are also included within the sphere of protection as defined by the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A sterilisation device with electron beams for thin walled containers comprising:

a sterilisation chamber, shielded to rays generated by the electron beams, extending along a sterilisation path, wherein along the sterilisation path, a first reference plane and a further reference plane are defined, separate from each other and incident to the sterilisation path; a first electron cannon having an emission axis lying in the first reference plane; and

a further electron cannon having an emission axis lying on the further reference plane;

wherein the emission axis of the further electron cannon is inclined in relation to the sterilisation path, unlike the emission axis of the first electron cannon,

wherein the sterilisation chamber comprises a main chamber extending in a first sterilisation direction and a secondary chamber extending in a second sterilisation direction, wherein the first electron cannon is positioned along the first sterilisation direction, and the further electron cannon is positioned along the second sterilisation direction,

first support means, positioned along the first sterilisation direction, suitable for guiding the thin walled containers so that they are positioned alongside each other in rows; and

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second support means, positioned along the second sterilisation direction, suitable for guiding the thin walled containers so that they are positioned behind each other in columns.

2. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein the emission axis of the first electron cannon and the sterilisation path define an emission plane and the emission axis of the further electron cannon is orthogonal to the emission plane.

3. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein the first electron cannon is positioned along the first sterilisation direction.

4. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein the further electron cannon is positioned along the second sterilisation direction.

5. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, comprising a second electron cannon having an emission axis, the emission axis being positioned on an emission plane of the first electron cannon, the second electron cannon being positioned on the side opposite the first electron cannon in relation to the first sterilisation direction.

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6. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein, upstream of the sterilisation chamber a pre-sterilisation chamber is positioned, shielded from the leakage of rays generated by the electron beams, extending in an input direction, orthogonal to the first sterilisation direction.

7. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein, downstream of the sterilisation chamber, a post-sterilisation chamber is positioned, shielded from the leakage of rays generated by the electron beams, extending in an output direction, orthogonal to the first sterilisation direction.

8. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, comprising, upstream of the sterilisation chamber, a swivelling, two-sector input unit.

9. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, comprising, downstream of the sterilisation chamber a swivelling, two-sector output unit.

10. The sterilisation device according to claim 1, wherein the second sterilisation direction is incident to the first sterilisation direction.

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